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* Accompany a Student Project
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When I first met Angela[[1]](#footnote-0), a student at Merlo-Station High School, her smiling demeanor, carefully put together outfit and slightly hectic energy reminded me of many of the girls I went through school with. For Angela however, her stylish clothes come from maternity section rather than the juniors department and her rush that morning stemmed from the necessity to get her almost two year old daughter breakfast before it stopped being served in the cafeteria rather than a race to have time for gossip before class.

At eighteen, Angela is, as she puts it, a “super senior” at the alternative options school of Merlo Station in Beaverton. Like many of the students at Merlo Station her road towards graduation has been unconventional, but as she enters her fifth year of high school she needs just three more credits to earn her diploma. Though many students attend her school because the more academically traditional options in the district have not led to success, for Angela it is not always the schoolwork with which she struggles. After becoming pregnant at sixteen Angela continued to not only attend, but excel at her former high school[[2]](#footnote-1), earning “all A’s” and generally enjoying her time there. However, during this period her young daughter began to refuse anything other than her mothers breast milk, leaving Angela with a very tough decision to make. Luckily, she had the option of transferring to Merlo Station where the Continuing Education for Young Parents (CEYP) program would allow her to attend classes as well as spend time with her daughter. This fall Angela will become the mother of another little girl while she continues to earn her diploma and move towards college where she hopes to begin studies in nursing.

* For the CEYP program the day is broken up into five periods. Angela’s first class in the morning is a period of work experience in the school’s daycare center where she cuddles and calms infants, followed by a Community School literacy skills class. Community school, the larger program to which CEYP belongs, is the biggest of several academic tracts offered at Merlo Station and “focuses on academic skills and credit completion as well as providing an emphasis on community service, career exploration and internships”.[[3]](#footnote-2) Angela’s literacy skills class gives way to an Academic Improvement Seminar for just CEYP students. This short seminar period leads into an early lunch so that the parents may eat with their children. After lunch Angela returns to Community School for a final literacy class (completely separate in content matter from her morning literacy class) and art.
* Each of Angela’s classes throughout the day were small and for the most part students, including Angela, sat in self-selected groups of two or three. It is important note however, that even the few students who sat alone were included in many social or class work related conversations. This observation supports Angela’s emphatic characterization of her school as a “community” where “no one would feel out of place” because “everyone talks to each other”. Indeed, throughout the day no obvious cliques seemed to manifest and Angela herself couldn’t name any groups of students who are inclusive or exclusive to certain students when I asked. Furthermore, I didn’t witness even one incidence where it appeared as though any student’s (including Angela) race, gender, ethnicity, class or culture positively or negatively impacted their connection to the school. Also apparent throughout the day was the respect with which everyone, students and teachers alike, treats each other. Angela supported this observation by reiterating her previous characterization of Merlo Station as a friendly and caring community when I asked her if she had ever felt as though any of her circumstances, be they race (she is of Mexican descent) or her role as a mother, had ever made her feel disconnected from the school.

In retrospect it is hard to judge the relevance or even the meaning of content and curriculum in Angela’s after attending just one day at such an early point in the term. Any attempt however, is further complicated by the fact that the majority of the class time I witnessed was spent going over announcements, checking homework or paperwork and handing out books for reading. Overall I saw Angela and her classmates begin only three activities throughout the day, one of which was quite literally copying definitions out of the dictionary (though that teacher did apologize to me for her “boring” content that day). Of the other two activities, one was a worksheet on transitions and sentence combining which required thinking for some students, though Angela finished it quite easily, and the other was working on a previously assigned single line drawing. This drawing activity took place in the Angela’s last class of the day, yet it was the first time since 7.30am that I had seen her go off autopilot. Her interest and focus derived not only because she “like[s] drawing a lot”, but because this assignment, as the teacher verbalized to the class, was meant to get the students thinking about art as a problem to solve.

Angela’s own description of her education at Merlo Station offers more insight into her experiences in Community School. She discussed with me that group work is common and that this method not only helps her to gain better understanding, but allows her to enjoy her time in school more because she is “a social person who likes to work with others”. Activities in Community School are generally more hands on, she says, than at her previous high school and there are more learning experiences which will stick with her for her whole life, like the planning she is currently doing for a project that requires her to organize something which will can make the world a better place (she is planning an event for locks for love donations).

As I began the task of shadowing a continuing young parent at Merlo Station I felt sure that my eyes would be opened to a new perspective on the experiences of high school, however I must admit that I expected to simply make conclusions about how difficult or complicated the circumstances are. Yet for Angela, whose life is centered around a caring school climate and bolstered by family support and other adult relationships, there was a sense of calm to her daily routine. Certainly “it is very hard” to be a teenage mother she told me, but the structure and support of her small school has allowed her to continue to be engaged in her education and maintain a positive view of her personal future. Thus, at the end of this assignment I find myself not just in awe of Angela, for her perseverance and responsibility, but the CEYP and Community School Programs as well, for the opportunities and support they are providing young parents.

1. All names have been changed. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Aloha High School in Beaverton. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. <http://www.beavton.k12.or.us/merlo_station/cs/index.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)